DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 184 025 CG 014 255

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TITLE	Senior Centers Administration: Training Needs in an Expanding Area of Professional Practice.
INSTITUTION	Syracuse Univ., N.Y. All-University Gerontology Center.
SPONS AGENCY	Administration on Aging (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	Nov 79
GRANT	90-A-1176
NOTE	12p.: Paper presented at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society (32nd, Washington, DC, November 25-29, 1979)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Administrator Education: *Administrators: *Educational Gerontology: Inservice Education: National Surveys: *Needs Assessment: Postsecondary Education: *Professional Continuing Education: Professional Development: Research Projects: *Training
IDENTIFIERS	*National Institute of Senior Centers (NCOA)

ABSTRACT

Senior centers are growing in size, number, variety, and sophistication of programs. However, administrative salaries are low, turnover is high and educational backgrounds are very diverse. A training needs assessment survey was carried out by means of a 57-item questionnaire mailed to 1,963 members of National Council on the Aging's (NCOA's) National Institute of Senior Centers. Analysis of the 417 returns revealed characteristics of center administrators, their educational backgrounds, their perceived educational needs, and details of their programs. The centers reported an average daily attendance of 145 people and 365 individual service contacts a month. Most administrators were female and between the ages of 35 and 54, with 73.3% having completed at least four years of college. Continuing education was considered very important by 72.8% of the respondents on topics including program design and development, skills for working with the elderly, and management training. Administrators and their centers reported a willingness to invest time and money in continuing education. (Author)

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Training Needs in an Expanding Area of Professional Practice

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For presentation at the 32nd Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society, Washington, D.C., November, 1979.

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SENIOR CENTERS ADMINISTRATION: TRAINING NEEDS IN AN EXPANDING AREA OF PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE*

Neal S. Bellos, Darrell Slover, Barbara Jones, and Cynthia Davenport**

Introduction

Senior Centers have shown marked development in size and numbers, and in the variety and sophistication of programs. The growth of Senior Centers has increased employment opportunities for administrative personnel. Newly established standards for practice in Senior Centers call for further sophistication in needs assessment, planning, evaluation, funding, documentation, and a number of other skills necessary for effective administration.

However, specific training and educational opportunities for Senior Center administrative personnel are limited and career ladders are obscure. There are no established academic avenues for formal training for Center administrators. Instead, the field has exhibited a great deal of horizontal mobility, with administrative personnel often recruited from other fields. The principle vehicle for training has been informal on-the-job experience, supplemented with occasional workshops and symposia.

In FY 1978, the All-University Gerontology Center of Syracuse University was awarded a Title IV-A Quality Improvement Grant to develop a comprehensive, integrated, and flexible mid-career educational program for senior center administrators. The project began with a systematic survey of educational needs, preferences, resources, and constraints among current practitioners.

Methodology

The instrument utilized for this needs assessment was a nine page, 57-item questionnaire including the eight groups of variables shown in Table 1. To facilitate coding and analysis, closed-ended, precoded questions were used, except for items requiring numerical responses. Opportunities were provided for

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respondents to express additional opinions via an "other" response category, although this option was seldom used.

After pre-testing, the final questionnaire was mailed to all 1793 member/subscribers of the National Institute of Senior Centers, although it was recognized that many on the list were not program administrators. 404 of the returned questionnaires were usable. It should be noted that the results utilized cannot be considered to be representative of all Senior Centers. The information pertaining to the characteristics of respondents suggests that our sample may over-represent larger Senior Center programs. However, information is not available to compare the responding Senior Centers with the total range of existing programs. The results of this survey are, therefore, only suggestive and not valid representation of the total field.

Characteristics of Respondents

The Senior Centers responding to the survey have an average daily attendance of 146 persons and have been in operation for about eight years. The "average" Senior Center in the sample handles an annual budget of about $170,000 and a staff of 8.4 full-time, 7.2 paid, part-time, and 84.9 volunteer workers. The Centers are open an average of five days per week, 1¼ evenings per week, and one half-day during weekends.

As shown in Table 2, the sample of Senior Center administrators is predominantly female and married. The age range includes almost equal numbers of younger and older persons, with a substantial number of administrators (6%) 65 years of age. 73% of the respondents have completed at least four years of college, and 38% possess graduate degrees. About half the respondents received their latest degree since 1967.

Administrators were asked to select a response describing their most recent previous work experience. As shown in Table 3, only 16% of the sample moved to their present positions from previous Senior Center experience, and less than one-third worked with older persons in their previous positions. Respondents have worked in the field of Senior Centers for an average of approximately 6 years, and have been at their present positions for an average of 4.5 years. These figures, combined with the fact that only 16% of the sample came to their present position from a previous Senior Center position, demonstrates horizontal mobility from other fields. When asked to rank order job responsibilities in terms of the time devoted to each, the highest ranked were: program and activity planning; administrative planning, and staff development and supervision.

Education and Career Development

Our primary objective was to identify the interests and preferences of the respondents toward continuing education. This information, plus the kinds of limitations that might influence these interests and preferences, provide the base

from which to articulate the elements of a continuing education model appropriate for Senior Center administrators.

74% of the respondents considered continuing education to be very important. They reported an average of 15 days per year devoted to continuing education, spending $206 of their own funds in 1977, and expecting to spend more in 1978.

This survey strongly suggests, moreover, strong support for continuing education for staff members, as shown in Tables 4 and 5. For example, 87% of the Centers provide paid time off for staff to participate in job-related continuing education. The Centers surveyed also provided full or partial financial support for such activities.

As another example of tangible support, we can report that 54% of our Senior Centers' budgets include a line for continuing education for agency personnel. In 1977, the average amount of money spent for this purpose was $1,700 annually.

The survey also elicited information pertaining to the timing, structure, and content of continuing education. 45% of the respondents have no particular preference for the calendar timing of continuing education opportunities, while 24% preferred the summer, 12% each preferred winter and spring, and only 3% preferred a fall experience. Table 6 shows the respondents' preferences regarding the length of continuing education. A two to four-day experience was clearly preferred for a continuing education program. A two-week workshop at an out-of-town location (such as Syracuse University) was seen as likely to be attended by only 27.5% of the respondents, unlikely to be attended by 49.7% with 22.7% being unable to predict at that time.

Table 7 identifies the respondents' opinion regarding the utility of different learning experiences. Although independent learning programs were rated the lowest in terms of usefulness, 59.1% of the sample had no previous experience with them. Workshops or institutes and professional meetings were cited as providing the most useful types of continuing education by nearly all administrators.

To gauge the interest and possibilities of using a "home study" package, a series of questions was asked concerning the desirability of continuing education "home study" modules. The results in Table 8 suggest a reasonably high interest in using a home study package, with 55.4% very likely to be interested and 24.5% of the respondents expressing a willingness to pay for the costs of the package.

To gain insights into possible content areas, a list of 18 continuing education topics were listed on the survey, and the Senior Center administrators asked to state which were very important, moderately important, or of little importance to them. This list, shown in Table 9, is rank-ordered according

to the percent of respondents indicating that the item was seen as "very important". Considerable variability in preferences is evident, but a majority seem to prefer topics relating to programming, management and leadership functions.

Alternatives for Education and Career Development for Senior Center Administrative Staff

Within the Senior Center field, on-the-job training is the primary means to prepare administrative staff for their positions. OJT is important, but sole reliance on this means of job preparation overlooks emerging innovations and opportunities. A more formalized continuing education process seems to be required to support emerging professionalism, development of new responsibilities, and the dissemination of a burgeoning knowledge base.

The respondents to this survey lend support to this view. Ninety-eight percent have affirmed the importance of continuing education and have demonstrated their concern through substantial annual investments of scarce resources--time, energy, and money. Among the alternatives for continuing education are college courses, degree programs, short-term workshops, or institutes and home study modules.

College courses and/or degree programs offer some promise for those who have convenient access to a college or university which can offer specialized courses for Senior Center Administrators. Such opportunities are relatively rare, and probably restricted to certain urban areas. Even if courses exist for large numbers of administrators, costs in time and money for weekly attendance in college courses may be prohibitive. However, some generic subject matter (e.g. supervision, personnel management, etc.) might be suitable and available at nearby colleges.

The other alternatives of short-term (2-4 day) workshops and home study modules are compared below in Table 10. It is interesting to note that the apparent strengths and weaknesses of workshops and home study modules approaches are quite complementary and worth combining. The content and/or subject material of the combined approach should be confined to those areas that are unique to Senior Center administration. Home study modules would be designed to provide the informational base of a given subject matter. These modules would be used by participants to prepare for participation in a workshop/institute. The subsequent workshop/institute would address the utilization and integration of the basic cognitive material in the development of necessary skills and attitudes. The experiential components of workshops would provide opportunities to practice, demonstrate, and evaluate essential skills and attitudes.

Each total package, combining a home study module followed by a workshop, could be offered cooperatively through several organizations and sites throughout the country such as: university-based gerontology centers; state and/or area agencies on aging; NISC and/or state associations of Senior Centers.

A consortium of gerontology centers in consultation with Senior Center professionals could define the scope and content of needed units. Each participating gerontology center might assume prime responsibility for developing one or two of the units. Each center could then market all of the resulting units within its own geographic region.

The Syracuse University project is developing five such units at this time, and is planning to test the viability of this model during the coming year. We believe that implementing this model will offer an opportunity to combine the talents of practitioners in the field with the expertise of various gerontology centers to design and deliver a continuing education program which cannot help but to enhance the provision of Senior Center administrative competencies.

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SUPPLEMENTARY TABLES
for
"SENIOR CENTER ADMINISTRATION: TRAINING NEEDS IN AN EXPANDING AREA OF PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE"*

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TABLE 1: ITEM CLUSTERS (VARIABLES) in NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

TABLE 2: GENDER, AGE and MARITAL STATUS of RESPONDENTS

TABLE 3: MOST RECENT PREVIOUS POSITION REPORTED by RESPONDENTS

TABLE 4: SENIOR CENTER VIEWS of CONTINUING EDUCATION

TABLE 5: AVAILABILITY of SENIOR CENTER FINANCIAL SUPPORT for WORK-RELATED CONTINUING EDUCATION

TABLE 6: PREFERENCES CONCERNING LENGTH of CONTINUING EDUCATION PROGRAM

TABLE 7: EXPERIENCE WITH and USEFULNESS of CONTINUING EDUCATION OPTIONS

TABLE 8: INTEREST IN and SUPPORT for HOME STUDY PACKAGES

TABLE 9: TRAINING TOPICS RATED AS "VERY IMPORTANT"

TABLE 10: COMPARISON of WORKSHOP/INSTITUTE and HOME STUDY FORMATS

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TABLE 1: ITEM CLUSTERS (VARIABLES) in NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

1. size and other characteristics of Senior Centers
2. demographic characteristics of respondents
3. nature of respondents' job responsibilities
4. respondents' work histories and job preparation
5. agency support for continuing education
6. respondents' use and evaluation of continuing education programs
7. respondents' reasons for participating or not participating in continuing education
8. respondents' evaluations of opportunities for career advancement

TABLE 2: GENDER, AGE and MARITAL STATUS of RESPONDENTS

GENDER

Female - 72%
Male - 28%

AGE		MARITAL STATUS	
34 or under	- 26%	Single	- 23%
35 - 54	- 42%	Married	- 65%
55 - 64	- 26%	Other	- 12%
65 or older	- 6%		

TABLE 3: MOST RECENT PREVIOUS POSITION REPORTED by RESPONDENTS

senior center	16%
another area of service to older persons	16%
another area of human service (not specific to older persons)	42%
educational programs (as students)	8%
other	18%

TABLE 4: SENIOR CENTER VIEWS of CONTINUING EDUCATION

"In your Senior Center, continuing education programs for staff are":

"viewed as beneficial:"		"Participation is:"	
usually	80%	encouraged	91%
sometimes	18%	discouraged	2%
rarely	2%	neither encouraged nor discouraged	7%

TABLE 5: AVAILABILITY of SENIOR CENTER FINANCIAL SUPPORT for WORK-RELATED CONTINUING EDUCATION

	YES
a. registration/tuition fee for course/workshop	81%
b. travel expenses (e.g., car, plane, etc.)	73%
c. per diem expenses (meals & lodging)	68%

TABLE 6: PREFERENCES CONCERNING LENGTH of CONTINUING EDUCATION PROGRAM

Total Program Length	Desirable	Too Brief	Implied too Brief	Too Long	Implied too Long
1 DAY	30%	51.6%	17.5%	N/A	N/A
2 DAY	59.5%	20.1%	13.2%	1.3%	4.5%
3 DAY	65.8%	4.6%	5.0%	11.6%	11.7%
1 WEEK	34.7%	0.5%	1.2%	42.5%	19.5%
2 WEEK	7.7%	0.7%	N/A	67.5%	22.7%
2 WEEK +	3.0%	0.5%	N/A	71.5%	23.4%

TABLE 7: EXPERIENCE WITH and USEFULNESS of CONTINUING EDUCATION OPTIONS

	Have Not Used	Have used & would Use again	Very Useful	Somewhat Useful	Not Useful
Workshops or institutes	2.2	95.5	74.6	18.5	7.5
Attendance at professional mtgs.	4.7	90.3	49.4	38.9	3.5
College or University courses	20.0	74.8	52.9	29.9	1.0
Self study of Prof. Literature	14.0	80.3	48.9	35.7	2.7
Self study of formal independent learning programs	59.1	30.4	27.7	31.9	7.2

TABLE 8: INTEREST IN and SUPPORT FOR HOME STUDY PACKAGES

	Very Likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat Unlikely	Very Unlikely
I would be interested in "Home Study" packages	55.4%	30.0%	8.7%	5.9%
My senior center would pay the entire cost of the package	29.6%	38.3%	16.0%	16.0%
My senior center would pay part of the cost, I'd pay the remainder	16.3%	37.2%	20.9%	25.6%
If necessary, I would pay the entire cost of the package	24.5%	26.4%	20.4%	28.7%

TABLE 9: TRAINING TOPICS RATED AS "VERY IMPORTANT"

		Very Important-
1.	Program design & development	74.1%
2.	Skills & attitudes for working with elderly clients	63.4%
3.	Management (staffing, planning, controlling, etc.)	61.9%
4.	Special needs & programs for older persons	60.9%
5.	Assessing needs of elderly constituents	57.5%
6.	Supervision	57.1%
7.	Group development & leadership	56.7%
8.	Federal/state programs	55.5%
9.	Gerontology - aging process	55.3%
10.	Member participation	54.3%
11.	Community relations (working with other agencies, Center's role in service network)	53.2%
12.	Program evaluation methods	51.3%
13.	Fiscal Management, budgeting and accounting systems	48.8%
14.	Volunteer management	40.3%
15.	Working with governing boards and advisory councils	36.9%
16.	Data systems, record-keeping methods, and reporting systems	32.2%
17.	Personnel policies and practices	24.3%
18	Facilities design	23.8%

TABLE 10: COMPARISON OF WORKSHOP/INSTITUTE and HOME STUDY FORMATS

Basis for Comparison	Workshop/Institute	Home Study Module
1. Cost to participants	Relatively high, especially with travel and per diem	Low - (development costs can be spread among a large number of users; some material already available in print)
2. Pacing of learning	Massed, inflexible, concentrated in a few days	Self-paced, distributed, flexible
3. Effective for what kinds of learning?	Attitudes, Skills	Knowledge (cognitive learning)
4. Potential for motivating stimulating to learner	Relatively high	Relatively low
5. Adaptability to changing needs, circumstances	Fairly high	low (preparation's turnaround time's lengthy)
6. Likelihood that learner will complete, once started	high	moderate - low